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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: ALMATY NOTES -- ZHOVTIS' CASE DISCUSSED ON THE STREETS, IN THE MEDIA

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11. The "Almaty Notes" series is intended to maintain focus on developments in civil society, the media, and the opposition in Almaty, Kazakhstan's "southern capital." For this edition, we review how the local media and civil society have reacted to the conviction of leading human rights activist Yevgeniy Zhovtis for vehicular manslaughter.

AZAT PARTY HOLDS PROTEST, POLICE STAND BY

12. On October 7, three leading activists of the Azat opposition party -- deputy chairman Petr Svoik, deputy chairperson Marzhan Aspandiyarova, and head of the party's Almaty branch Kadyrzhan Askarov -- organized a public protest in support of Evgeniy Zhovtis at the popular "Arbat" promenade in Amaty. Approximately 20 people, including opposition journalists, NGO activists, and several passers-by, gathered to listen to the activists explain the details of the case and why they believe the conviction was politically motivated. Svoik warned that the Almaty regional court's decision to deny the appeal of journalist Tokniyaz Kuchukov does not bode well for Zhovtis' appeal hearing on October 20. In a potentially precedent-setting case, Kuchukov was sentenced on August 28 to four years in prison for striking and killing a pedestrian in May.

13. The organizers did not have official permission to hold the protest, but the police at the scene let it proceed without much interference. The Almaty deputy police chief told the organizers beforehand that they could proceed as long as they did not march or hold up posters. When the protesters did unfurl three posters that said "Today - Zhovtis, Tomorrow - You!," the police simply confiscated the signs and let the demonstration continue. Uncharacteristically, the organizers were not detained or fined for holding an unsanctioned protest.

OTHER ACTIVISTS NOT SO LUCKY

14. In contrast, authorities detained or fined several NGO activists who similarly protested. Since Zhovtis' conviction on September 3, his colleagues from the Human Rights Bureau and independent activists held four separate small demonstrations in downtown Almaty, and in all four instances, police detained and fined the

organizers for holding unsanctioned rallies.

DIFFERING VIEWS FROM THE MEDIA

15. The Almaty print media conveyed various views on the trial and the conviction. The opposition and independent newspapers, like "Respublika," "Svoboda Slova," "Vzglyad," and "Vremya," expressed full support for Zhovtis. Opposition newspapers warned that it was the authorities' "dream to limit [Zhovtis'] movements and freedom." Russian-language, pro-government news outlets, like "Kazakhstanskaya Pravda" and "Megapolis," reported the story without pronouncing judgment on Zhovtis' guilt or innocence. Some Kazakh-language press, however, ran commentaries that called for Zhovtis to be treated "as any other citizen" and blamed the Russian-language media outlets for "forgetting about the victim's tragedy." Media's attention to the case has subsided significantly in recent weeks, but it will likely pick back up when Zhovtis' appeal is heard on October 20.

ZHOVTIS -- "THIS PLACE NEEDS ME"

16. In the meantime, Zhovtis' wife Svetlana Vitkovskaya, told RFE/RL that Zhovtis was studying Kazakh and had no plans to leave Kazakhstan in the future. Zhovtis reportedly asked his wife to bring him textbooks in Kazakh. When his wife wondered whether the time has come to leave Kazakhstan, Zhovtis said "I will go nowhere -- this place needs me and it is important for me to be in Kazakhstan."

17. COMMENT: Because the Almaty police usually detain and fine organizers of unsanctioned protests, the fact that Azat's protest went largely unfettered could signify that local authorities were told to handle carefully Zhovtis-related events and avoid incurring

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further bad publicity. Media views fall largely in line with the outlet's affiliations, with the opposition newspapers highlighting the injustice to Zhovtis, while the Kazakh-language media, which tends to be more nationalistic and pro-government, concentrated on the fate of the Kazakh victim. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND